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SUBJECT: BRIGHT SPOTS AND TROUBLE SPOTS FOR RELIGION IN VIETNAM

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1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: In recent months, Vietnam has made several significant reforms in its laws that govern religion and has taken a number of other positive steps for religious believers, including releasing several religious prisoners. Catholic and Protestant religious leaders state that their ability to practice religion freely is improving. Despite this, significant problems remain. The legal changes leave unchanged the principle of Government supervision of religious activities at all levels. Positive legal changes have largely not yet been adequately disseminated to local-level officials, who, in some cases, continue to implement previous, more onerous, regulations. The leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) remain under pagoda arrest, and relations with some Hoa Hao and Mennonite groups are troubled. The GVN seems to focus on these groups because it views them as political threats, not for religious reasons, however. The legal changes Vietnam has made offer considerable potential for further improvements on the ground, but this potential has yet to be realized. Vietnam has made good progress two of the bases for CPC designation - release of religious prisoners and dealing with forced renunciations of faith - but less on the other two - opening new churches and disciplining officials guilty of abuses. End Summary and Comment.

Legal Reforms Bring Some Positive Changes

2. (SBU) The most significant recent development regarding religion in Vietnam is the revamping of the legal codes that govern religious activity. Vietnam's new Ordinance on Religion and Belief was issued in June 2004, and came into effect on November 15 of that year. The Ordinance serves as the primary document governing religious practice in Vietnam. It reiterates citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion, and the freedom not to follow a religion, and states that violations of these freedoms are prohibited (a reference to forced renunciations). The Ordinance continues the practice of Government control and oversight of religious organizations, however. Among its provisions are that religious denominations as a whole, as well as individual religious congregations, must be recognized by appropriate authorities, and that the establishment of seminaries and enrollment of classes must also be approved by the Government. The Ordinance relaxes Government oversight of religion to some extent. For example, religious organizations are now only required to register their annual activities and the promotion of clerics with authorities, while in the past this required the authorities' explicit approval. Further, the Ordinance encourages religious groups to carry out charitable activities in healthcare and education, which was sharply limited in the past. In this regard, the Catholic Church is playing an increasing role in providing HIV/AIDS care in Ho Chi Minh City and Hue.

3. (SBU) On March 1, the Government issued an implementing decree that provides further guidance on the Ordinance. As in the Ordinance, the Implementing Decree explicitly bans forced renunciations of faith. It notes the specific procedures by which religious groups can apply for official recognition from the Government, receive approval to open churches and train priests, and register other activities. It further sets out specific time periods for the Government to consider requests from religious organizations and provide a response in writing. Several religious organizations, including some Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and a Mennonite group not affiliated with activist Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang are reportedly seeking recognition under the terms of the Implementing Decree.

4. (SBU) On February 4, the Prime Minister issued the "Instruction on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism," which provides tone and guidance for authorities to use in their relations with Protestant groups. The Instruction calls upon authorities to facilitate the requests of recognized Protestant denominations to construct churches and train and appoint pastors. Furthermore, it directs authorities to

help unrecognized denominations register their congregations so that they can practice openly and move towards fulfilling the criteria required for full recognition. Addressing the Central and Northwest Highlands, the Instruction requires authorities to help groups of Protestant believers register their religious activities and practice in homes of "suitable locations," even if they do not meet the criteria to establish an official congregation. The Instruction effectively allows unregistered "house churches" to operate so long as they are "committed to follow regulations" and are not affiliated with separatist movements.

15. (SBU) The Government has taken some steps to ensure these new legal guidelines are understood and implemented. The national-level Committee For Religious Affairs held two conferences for provincial-level counterparts to explain the new legal framework for religion. The provincial-level committees were then charged with disseminating information about the new legal framework to district-, commune-, and village-level authorities. Knowledge of the new legal framework at lower levels of the Government remains patchy, however. Authorities in some areas have actively engaged religious leaders in efforts to implement the changes. More common, however, is that authorities remained ignorant of them, especially at the grassroots level and in rural areas.

Prisoner Releases

16. (SBU) The GVN has made significant progress in releasing religious prisoners over the past twelve months. Recent releases include Hmong Protestants Vang Chin Sang, Vang Mi Ly, Ly Chin Seng Ly Xin Quang, and Mua A Chau, UBCV monk Thich Thien Minh, Hoa Hao followers Ho Van Trong, Truong Van Duc, Nguyen Van Lia and Nguyen Ha Hai (who died of cancer shortly after his release) and Catholic priests Nguyen Van Ly and Pham Minh Tri. In addition, the GVN has been forthcoming with information on other individuals of concern, some of whom were already free but remained on our prisoner lists because the GVN previously had not confirmed their sentences or releases. As a result, our list of prisoners of concern for religious reasons has dropped to six individuals. Three of them are recent cases however; two are Hoa Hao arrested in February for distributing illegal religious audio cassettes and DVDs, and one is a Baptist preacher committed to a mental hospital, apparently for calling upon party officials to abandon Marxism-Leninism and to follow Christ instead.

Official Denominations Report Improvements

17. (SBU) Officials in Vietnam's officially-recognized religious organizations point to a number of recent steps that show positive progress. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam: North (ECVN) held its long-delayed national congress in December, the first time it has been able to do so since 1988. The meeting allowed the ECVN to elect new leaders and set priorities for the development of the Church. The congress had been delayed initially due to the Government's refusal to permit the meeting, and in recent years due to the Church's refusal to accept GVN interference in the selection of its leaders. The ECVN's southern counterpart, the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) held its second national congress March 1 to 4, the first being shortly after the SECV's establishment in 2001. The newly elected ECVN and SECV leadership boards were formally received by Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan at the Office of the Government in Hanoi, which ECVN leaders welcomed as a sign of respect. SECV leaders have also pointed to progress in quietly reopening house churches - without officially registering them - in some parts of the Central Highlands.

18. (SBU) Catholic leaders similarly welcomed as an important symbolic step the condolences issued by Vietnam upon the death of Pope John Paul II and the congratulations on the naming of Benedict XVI. More tangibly, the GVN has allowed the Catholic Seminary of Hanoi to accept incoming classes yearly, from bi-annually, helping to address the shortage of priests that frustrates the Church. While the Church has many eager candidates for each seminary position, overall enrollment limits and political screening of candidates remain in place. The GVN has approved the long-pending Church request to sub-divide the southern Xuan Loc diocese and to create a new bishopric. The Government also permitted the visit to Vietnam of exiled Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh earlier this year. Hanh, who has spent nearly forty years in exile, traveled widely though the country, secured publication of his previously-banned books and made some private recommendations to Vietnamese leaders that were critical of the state of Buddhism under the officially-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.

Central and Northwest Highlands Remain Difficult

19. (SBU) Vietnam's Central and Northwest Highlands have been flashpoints for religious tensions in recent years due to security concerns in the two regions and the rapid growth of evangelical Protestantism among some of the ethnic minority groups present there. There has been some positive progress in the Central Highlands: new provincial leadership in Gia Lai Province has led to a more open situation for SECV and house churches. In April, the SECV was permitted to open a special training class for 46 house church preachers in the region, allowing them soon to receive formal recognition as pastors. In neighboring Dak Lak Province, however, uncooperative leaders have made the situation for the Church more difficult. The SECV has opened 22 churches in Gia Lai and expects another 10 to 20 by the end of the year, but in Dak Lak there are only four. (Note: In a recent meeting with the Ambassador, Vice Minister of Public Security Huong said that as many as 41 church "branches" have been registered in Gia Lai, and that number again are "under consideration" in Dak Lak. This is higher than what provincial authorities report, and may be due to the process of agglomerating several heretofore unrecognized house churches into larger, officially recognized SECV churches. End note.)

10. (SBU) In the Northwest Highlands, the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism has led to improvements in certain areas. The Instruction was the first document to formally acknowledge the existence of Protestants in the northwest. Officials in Lao Cai Province appear to have taken this to heart, and acknowledged to the Ambassador that there are Protestant house churches there and that they are trying to implement the Prime Minister's Instruction with regards to these churches. In the other Highlands provinces of Dien Bien, Lai Chau and Ha Giang, however, officials continue to deny to visiting diplomats that there are any Protestants in their provinces. The Embassy continues to hear allegations of attempts by officials in the northwest to force Protestant converts to renounce their faith, including in Lao Cai. These are fewer than in the past, however, and some house church leaders have said that they practice far more openly now than in the past.

Some Trouble Spots Remain -----

11. (SBU) The Government remains intransigent towards the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Leaders largely remain under official or de facto pagoda arrest since the group held an unauthorized conference in Binh Dinh Province in October 2003. UBCV leaders frequently mix political rhetoric into their calls for freedom to operate as an independent Buddhist organization, and the group has a strong tradition of social advocacy dating from pre-unification South Vietnam. The official sentences of administrative detention placed on four Ho Chi Minh City-based UBCV monks will expire this November.

12. (SBU) Relations between authorities and the Mennonite church of Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang is another difficult area. Quang maintained a robust record of confronting Ho Chi Minh City officials who interfered with his unauthorized church services, and on at least one occasion this resulted in violence, landing Quang in jail for three years, with five of his followers' receiving shorter sentences. Since then, Quang's wife has attempted to continue holding church services. City authorities repeatedly disrupted these services, often bringing churchgoers to a station house for several hours of "questioning." This appears to have quieted recently, however. Finally, the Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC), an unrecognized sect, has engaged in a number of confrontational public protests recently, including threats of self-immolation. The GVN has difficult relations with the Hoa Hao, perhaps rooted in the sect's pre-1975 anti-communist activities.

Progress Mixed on CPC Bases -----

13. (SBU) Vietnam has been talking a good game in terms of improving the situation for religion here. Indeed, for the majority of believers, the situation has improved; there are more priests and pastors than in the past, churches and pagodas are flourishing, and Vietnamese citizens are able to follow their individual spiritual paths in a way that was difficult ten years ago and impossible twenty years ago.

14. (SBU) CPC designation was made for different reasons, however, and was based on four major concerns: releasing religious prisoners, opening new churches in the Central and Northwest Highlands, ending forced renunciations of faith and holding accountable officials guilty of the abuse of religious believers. On this score we are half way there. Excellent progress has been made on religious prisoners, although the Government continues to impose restrictions on some individuals who have been released, such as Father Ly,

and on others who have never been charged, such as the UBCV leaders. The Ordinance on Religion and its Implementing Decree both prohibit forced renunciations of faith, and while we continue to hear of isolated cases in the Northwest Highlands, contacts tell us that this happens less than in the past. On opening new churches, the Implementing Decree and the Prime Minister's Instruction open the door to the recognition of new official churches and registration of house churches. While we can point to some progress in opening (or re-opening) SECV-affiliated churches, only a handful of house churches have registered under the new legal framework so far. We await more progress on this most fundamental issue. Finally we have no evidence of actions to reprimand officials guilty of abuses. We hold little hope for seeing punishment of past abuses, but will keep the GVN's feet to the fire when transgressions within the new legal framework are evident.

MARINE